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ABSTRACT

Various aspects of the relationship between minorities and malnutrition are discussed in this brief paper. Malnutrition, one of the byproducts of low economic status, is creating a crisis-proportion health problem affecting minority citizens. Malnutrition seriously affects children, older people in poverty, and chronically unemployed or underemployed youth. It is also most likely to be found among the drug and alcohol addicted population. Frequently, malnutrition leads to tuberculosis and other diseases among older people and results in infant mortality and diseases of the newborn. Poverty has been identified as the cause of malnutrition, and a corresponding proportion of difficulties children experience in school and later in their career development may be due to deficit nutrition affecting brain growth during early life. Because Detroit's over fifty percent black population is the worst affected economically in the entire nation, the city is most likely to be affected by malnutrition on a scale greater than the national average. The Detroit Urban League intends to direct research effort in evaluating the nutritional problems of minorities in order to find productive outlets for channeling their resources. (Author/AM)

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MINORITIES & MALNUTRITION

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MINORITIES & MALNUTRITION

Malnutrition in the United States, one of the by-products of low economic status, is creating a crisis-proportion health problem most acutely affecting minority citizens. Because of malnutrition, an astounding number of Americans, especially very young children and pregnant women in low income families and older people on fixed incomes, are denied the right to pursue a healthy life.

The New York Times, November 2, 1975, reported the findings of a group of California-based scientists who estimated that 1,100,000 children in the U.S. face malnutrition and consequently have either suffered brain damage or are likely to suffer it in the future. Using extensive data from a 10 state nutrition study and data from the 1970 U.S. Census, they also found 945,000 pregnant women suffering malnutrition, thus seriously affecting the newborn. The scientists, while identifying poverty as the cause of malnutrition, further stated that a corresponding proportion of difficulties children experience in school and later in their career development may be due to undernutrition affecting brain growth during early life, "thus interfering in the most serious way with the quality of their lives, and placing an unmeasured but probably significant burden on the rest of United States society."

Although estimates are not available, malnutrition also affects older people in poverty and chronically unemployed or underemployed youth. It is also most likely to be found among

the drug and alcohol addicted population. Frequently, malnutrition leads to tuberculosis and other diseases among older people and results in infant mortality and diseases of the newborn.

Every economic crisis carries with it a heavy burden of unemployment and/or inflation. Blacks and other minorities bear a disproportionate share of these economic upheavals and with every new crisis the group of malnourished people enlarges. In 1973, for example, according to the Health Department of the City of Detroit, black families constituted 28% of the population of Wayne County, yet they accounted for 56% (18,241) of families with incomes below $1,000. Out of 42,125 families with incomes below the officially designated poverty line in Detroit, 28,140 (nearly 70%) were black. The same source also reports that in 1973, in the City of Detroit, 16,524 black children were born with abnormalities compared to 8,860 among white children. The newborn disease rate was 40.4 per 100,000 among black children, compared to 10.1 among white children. The death rate per 1,000 live births was 30.2 for black children, compared to 15.7 for white children. Live births with immature birth weight (weighing 2500 grams or less at birth, indicating probable brain damage as reported by the California scientists) was 14.4 per 100,000 for black children compared to 7.4 for white children. The death rate due to tuberculosis was 6.0 per 100,000 for blacks compared to 2.7 for whites. Reported cases of new active TB per 100,000 was 52.6 for non-whites compared to 23.9 for whites.

According to findings of the National Urban League (NUL), published by the Research Department in July, 1975, the total

number of unemployed blacks during the first and second quarters of 1975 reached an alarming three million, or 26% of the total black labor force. The NUL's Quarterly Economic Report on the Black Worker (May 1975), estimated that 50% or more blacks in inner-city poverty areas were unemployed.

Because Detroit's over 50% black population is the worst affected economically in the entire nation, the city is most likely to be affected by malnutrition on a scale greater than the national average. Newborn mortality rate, newborn disease rate and tuberculosis affliction data clearly support this statement.

POPULATION TRENDS - The historical, quantitative findings of Professor Simon Kuznets, the recent Nobel Prize winner in Economics, indicate that rapid industrialization and consequent prosperity brought a decline of birth rates in contemporary advanced western countries. But in the United States, a higher black birth rate than white indicates the consequences of persistent economic disparity between the two communities. In 1973, Detroit's black population had a crude birth rate of 22.6 per 1,000 population compared to 13.5 for whites. The current low economic status of blacks portends a health crisis more severe among blacks and more widespread malnutrition with its debilitating effects. That this population growth rate cannot be stabilized other than through rapid economic prosperity is borne out by the historical, quantitative evidence of contemporary advanced countries. The malnutrition crisis, and the health crisis in general, has reached an alarming rate among the black population today. It is no surprise, then,

that the American Public Health Association, for the first time in its 103 year history, dedicated its annual meeting (October 21, 1974, New Orleans) to the discussion of the health of minorities. In his presidential speech, Lorin E. Kerr, M.D., MSPH, stated with devastating criticism, a simple fact: "Today, the universal attitude toward minorities is little different from the treatment of the Indians and black people by the Founding Fathers."

Low economic status, in the midst of affluence and unparalled technical and economic resources, makes it foolhardy for any person to be denied adequate food. In general, there is an urgent need for a federal full employment program, national health insurance and national socio-economic planning in order to alleviate the present health crisis.

The Detroit Urban League, dedicated to the cause of uplifting minorities since 1916, will direct research effort in evaluating the nutritional problems of minorities in order to find productive outlets for channeling our resources.